

AN ANALYSIS OF UNITED STATES PRISONER OF WAR-MISSING IN ACTION
ACCOUNTING OPERATIONS AND THEIR CORRELATION TO
THE NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN
THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOCIALIST
REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Strategy

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF UNITED STATES PRISONER OF WAR-MISSING IN ACTION ACCOUNTING OPERATIONS AND THEIR CORRELATION TO THE NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM by MAJ Jeffrey A. Steel, USA, 80 pages.

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ACRONYMS

CIL	Central Identification Laboratory, also known as CIL-HI due to its location in Hawaii. The CIL was also established in Hawaii in 1973 with the mission of identifying remains
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam, also known as North Vietnam, or Communist Vietnam. It becomes the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after the Republic of Vietnam was defeated and the country consolidated under the communist government in Hanoi.
FPJMC	Four Party Joint Military Committee. Established by the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973 in order to oversee the cease-fire.
FPJMT	Four Party Joint Military Team. Residual team from the FPJMT established to coordinate issues remaining after the 60-day implementation period of the Paris Peace Accords. This organization was the major vehicle for technical talks between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for POW/MIA issues.
JCRC	Joint Casualty Resolution Center. The JCRC was activated in Saigon in 1973 and was primarily responsible for POW/MIA search efforts in Indochina until it was absorbed into JTF-FA in 1992.
JPAC	Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command. JPAC was formed on 1 Oct 2004 by combining JTF-FA and CIL under one headquarters.
JTF-FA	Joint Task Force FULL ACCOUNTING. JTF-FA was established in 1992 to take over the accounting mission of JCRC, which had greatly increased due to progress in US-Vietnamese relations.
POW/MIA	Prisoner of War/Missing in Action
PRC	People's Republic of China
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
US	United States
USPACOM	United States Pacific Command. A geographical Combatant Command responsible for US military operations throughout the Pacific Ocean Area as well as parts of the Indian Ocean and large parts of Eurasia.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the most unexpected and interesting developments in the area of international diplomacy in the recent past has been the normalization of relations between the United States of America (USA) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Immediately after the fall of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in April 1975, relations between the United States and Vietnam were strained, to say the least. Even today, most of the US public does not understand how much closer relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have become. It is quite easy to find people who believe that there are still prisoners of war (POWs) being held against their will in Vietnam.

Today, the state of relations between the United States and Vietnam is quite different than what is commonly perceived. Much of the US public still perceives that our relationship with Vietnam remains predominantly adversarial with limited engagement. However, Vietnam is steadily, if slowly, making progress in its way along a course of economic reform and cooperation with the United States. If current trends continue and the reform spreads into the realm of political liberalization and democracy may emerge, someday we may actually say that the United States lost the war, but won the peace.

It appears that the deep concern for the fullest possible accounting of missing service members was leveraged as a tool by both the US and the SRV to facilitate the normalization of bilateral relations. For the US it may have been a tool of unexpected opportunity; for Vietnam, it was consciously used from the outset. The US military was the vehicle used to conduct these recovery operations and its role then expanded to include the conduct of several other operations designed to increase confidence that now

include visits by US warships to Vietnam and expanded military-to-military contact. Today the Department of Defense, through its MIA accounting efforts, continues to play a key role as not only a simple military instrument in forming and maintaining the relationship with Vietnam, but as a diplomatic instrument to increase bilateral confidence and further US interests in respect to Vietnam.

Problem Statement

This paper examines the history of the recent normalization of US-Vietnamese relations between 1973 and 2004 and will investigate how US military engagement strategies, and specifically those actions involving the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC), the Central Identification Laboratory (CIL), and Joint Task Force Full Accounting (JTF-FA)¹ may have been used by the United States as a key tool to facilitate diplomatic and economic initiatives. It will also consider the implications for future strategies in dealing with former military adversaries. There have been many changes in the world since the Republic of Vietnam collapsed in 1975.² Although the US-Vietnamese relationship has grown much closer within the last fifteen years, the individual events and initiatives resulting in this trend have not been researched in detail as they relate to each other, nor has anyone addressed what part the activities of units of the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) played in these developments. Much of what was accomplished diplomatically was facilitated by military-driven initiatives such as the search for and repatriation of missing US service members from the Vietnam War. This paper examines the chain of events that resulted in our improved relationship with Vietnam, with a focus on USPACOM Accounting efforts (JCRC, JTF-FA, and JPAC) and how they related to later diplomatic, informational, and economic initiatives.

Primary Question

Did the POW/MIA accounting effort play a significant role in opening up relations between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam?

Subordinate Questions

What events led to the normalization of US-Vietnamese relations?

Were the formations of JCRC and JTF-FA primarily used to establish relations with a closed and reclusive communist state of Vietnam, or was it more important to set the conditions for acceptance of the normalization of relations in the minds of the US public?

Did accounting activities provide a forum for other diplomatic discussions?

Did these accounting activities play other roles such as increasing mutual trust?

Did accounting efforts open the door for other diplomatic initiatives?

Did accounting activities increase the mutual trust between United States' and Vietnamese senior military and diplomatic leadership?

Did accounting efforts allow the United States to build a better understanding of the Vietnamese government, as well as its motivations, concerns, and workings?

What were the political concerns about the normalization of relations here at home in the United States?

What USPACOM engagement activities occurred between 1975 and the present?

How were POW/MIA accounting efforts linked to the National Security Strategies?

How did the Vietnamese view these POW/MIA accounting activities?

What interaction occurred between USPACOM and the US Department of State?

What part did the economic aspects of accounting efforts play?

Significance of the Study

Vietnam has been central to US interests in Southeast Asia since the fall of French Indochina in 1954 and remains important today. It is strategically located along East-West trade routes and borders China. It possesses significant natural resources including oil and coal. In the Northern provinces alone, thick layers of coal sit untapped and even exposed on the surface. Using predominantly nonmechanized farming techniques, it produces enough rice to feed itself and export approximately 4 million tons in 2004.³ Its long coastline offers everything from superb natural harbors capable of sheltering cruise liners and carrier battle groups to miles of pristine beaches. The economic potential of its 81 million inhabitants is enormous. The recent flooding of large amounts of cheap Vietnamese shrimp and fish on US markets is not simply the product of an economic strategy or abundant natural resources, but is an effect of the availability of vast numbers of inexpensive, but hard-working laborers.

US-Vietnamese relations continue to improve dramatically with developments occurring at a rapid pace. Since the lifting of the embargo in 1994, US-Vietnamese trade has increased to over \$6 billion.⁴ The *Washington Times* carried a four-page special report on 29 April 2005, that focused on Vietnamese efforts to join the World Trade Organization (WTO).⁵ Militarily, Vietnam passively supports the Global War on Terror by simple, but important, actions such as allowing overflights. Pham Van Tra, the Minister of National Defence of the SRV even wrote a five-page article “Vietnam: Building and sustaining People’s Defense” in the December 2004 issue of *Joint Forces Quarterly*, the flagship publication of the US Department of Defense Joint Staff.⁶

How did US-Vietnamese relations reach such a point so soon after a long and costly conflict that caused great destruction in Vietnam and damaged the reputation of US power in the global arena? What part did the US military play in this process? To truly understand the status and development of the current US-Vietnamese relationship and how future military engagement plans can affect this and other bilateral relationships, one must examine what part military activities played in the normalization of relations and how they may have affected cooperation in the diplomatic and economic arenas. If USPACOM POW/MIA accounting activities played a significant role in normalizing relations between the US, lessons learned from these engagement activities could be useful in developing US postconflict engagement strategies with other adversarial states.

Background

On the 29th of March 1973, the last US troops departed Vietnam. Peace negotiations had begun as plenary talks in Paris in January 1969 and had eventually led to the “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.” This agreement was supposed to establish President Nixon’s “Peace with Honor.” However, it did not provide for the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam. (A detailed chronology of events can be found in Appendix A of this study.) Likewise, Chapter III, Article 8(b) of the agreement, which obligated the signatories to “determine the location and take care of the graves of the dead so as to facilitate the exhumation and repatriation of the remains, and to take any such other measures as may be required to get information about those still considered missing in action,” was also not truly enforceable by the United States under the strategic conditions in which the country found itself at the time.⁷

The United States was negotiating from a position of weakness in the all the instruments of power. Economic pressure could not effectively be brought to bear because of the massive support that the north was receiving from China and the Soviet Union. Likewise, the informational instrument was weakened by the years of ongoing combat without any end in sight. The only language that was clearly effective in influencing the actions of the Communists was that of military force, as evidenced by the effectiveness of Operation Linebacker II, also known as the “Christmas Bombing” in bringing the north back to the negotiating table.⁸ However, conflicting US public interests restricted the employment of the military instrument.⁹ These factors combined to severely limit diplomatic options, both in respect to bilateral negotiations with the North Vietnamese and in multilateral initiatives involving the RVN.

Two other factors weakened the provision for the return of remains and accounting for the missing. The first factor was that the war between the North and the South continued to rage. This made recovery and accounting operations very difficult and often impossible. The second factor was that a single comprehensive list of the missing was not provided to the North Vietnamese. The failure to provide the list was partly because of US distrust of the North Vietnamese. Perhaps more important, though, was the fact that the Department of Defense was unable to produce a single comprehensive list of the missing without discrepancies. The department could not produce such a list because multiple lists were being kept using different sources and criteria.¹⁰

After the return of the POWs in March 1973, efforts to find the missing and recover remains continued. At that time over 2,500 service members were listed as missing.¹¹ It is important to note that the number of Vietnamese missing were probably

in the hundreds of thousands. This great difference in magnitude may have affected later Vietnamese perceptions of the issue as well as their sense of fairness.

On 23 January 1973 the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) had been formed in Saigon under BG Robert C. Kingston to resolve the fate of the missing.¹² This team focused on actual investigation and recovery efforts, while the US delegation to the Four Party Joint Military Team (FPJMT) handled issues which required direct negotiation with the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG or the “Viet Cong”) and the DRV.¹³ Yet progress was significantly hampered by two major factors. The risk to recovery teams resulting from the ongoing fighting forced a reduction in search efforts. Additionally, the Communists linked the purely humanitarian recovery effort with political goals, not only hindering recovery missions by restricting search efforts or refusing to guarantee their safety, but possibly by withholding information on the location of remains.

However, these efforts ended when the US vetoed Vietnamese membership in the United Nations on 11 August 1975. Few significant actions by either side were taken until September 1978, when the Vietnamese government decided to seek the normalization of relations, but only with the precondition of reconstruction and economic aid from the US. At this time, there was a crisis between the SRV and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), along with their Khmer Rouge clients in Kampuchea (Cambodia). Simultaneously, the Carter administration was continuing the policy of normalizing relations with China, which was begun in 1971 by the Nixon administration. The attack by China into Vietnam in support of its Cambodian allies in February 1979 made it clear to the administration that normalization between the United States and both

Vietnam and China could not occur due to the increasing hostility between the countries and their long history as enemies.¹⁴ Therefore, although the administration desired to make progress on the POW/MIA issue, the diplomatic sensitivities of the PRC had to be taken into account. Thus, the diplomatic instrument of the United States in relation to China was strengthened at the cost of weakening efforts with respect to Vietnam.

During this period of diplomatic and military turmoil in Southeast Asia, two key USPACOM organizations were involved in the accounting effort. These were the US Army Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) and the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC). JCRC continued to handle POW/MIA accounting efforts until 1992. In 1992 Joint Task Force Full Accounting (JTF-FA) evolved from JCRC and operated from 1992 to 2002. In 2002 the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) resulted from the marriage of JTF-FA and CIL. This organization is currently responsible for accounting efforts across the globe, not just in Southeast Asia.¹⁵

Limitations

In examining these questions, the study will focus primarily on US-Vietnamese bilateral relationships and limit discussion on other concurrent US diplomatic initiatives and engagement activities such as those with China, Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Laos. Although strategies for other key regional players are linked to the development of strategies for Vietnam, they do not play a significant role in determining how particular POW/MIA accounting activities did or did not provide opportunities for specific bilateral diplomatic and economic activities with Vietnam.

Only unclassified sources will be examined. Classified materials should not be necessary because of the emphasis on positive nonadversarial developments in US-

Vietnamese relations and the fact that only US-Vietnamese bilateral engagement will be dealt with.

This paper also will not cover the social reasons that the people of the United States began to place more emphasis on the POW/MIA issues after the Vietnam War than after previous wars. The reasons that such emphasis was placed on those lost in Vietnam are not as important as the simple fact that the US public had a deep concern for the fullest possible accounting for its missing service members. In examining the subject of the normalization of relations, only the fact that the citizenry, and thus the voters, had an interest in the perceived fairness of any agreement is important. The reasons *why* such a perception was necessary to satisfy the honor of the American psyche would demand much more research than is possible in this thesis and is not essential to answering the primary question.

The specific numbers and categories of missing services members will not be discussed. This very complicated issue is not essential to determining the effects of the POW/MIA accounting efforts on the strategic level. The number is dependant upon the definitions used to classify the missing as well as the time period that is being discussed. What is important is the magnitude of the number, which was estimated to be approximately 2500 at the time of the withdrawal of major US military forces from Vietnam in 1973 and has decreased ever since.¹⁶ The number of Vietnamese missing, both those fighting for the RVN and the DRV, is even more difficult to determine, but probably numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

In summation, this study will examine if the actions of USPACOM specifically relating to POW/MIA accounting and recovery played a significant role in opening up

relations between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This is a critical area to research because of the continued importance of Vietnam to the US and the need to understand the background of our current bilateral relationship. It is also important because any lessons learned about how actions such as these may assist in opening up relations with former adversaries. It will examine the events leading to the normalization of US-Vietnamese relations with a focus on USPACOM actions. It will relate these events to USPACOM POW/MIA accounting activities to determine how these strategies were linked to US National Security Strategies, while limiting discussion about broader regional US interests and the effects of engagement actions directed towards other states.

Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on this subject from the perspective of applicability and thoroughness. Chapter 3 discusses the method and logic that was used to attack this problem. It will present a simple roadmap for the analysis conducted in chapter 4 without offering an argument or providing actual data. It also discusses the persons who provided interviews and primary source information for this paper. The heart of the paper is found in chapter 4, where the main analysis occurs. This chapter examines several specific ways that the accounting effort may have facilitated diplomatic initiatives that ultimately lead to normalization. The conclusion, chapter 5, synthesizes the individual issues discussed in chapter 4 and presents an answer to the primary thesis question. It also discusses what lessons can be learned for the POW/MIA accounting effort at the strategic level, and suggests what further research should be done.

This paper is not meant to be a historical synopsis of the POW/MIA issue, but is meant to be a strategic analysis of the effects of the POW/MIA effort that presents new

ideas on the effects of these efforts. In doing this it, hopefully, provides a good review of sources that will provide a basis for future studies and analysis. Because of the inherent nature of strategic policy discussions, is inevitable that many of the points made herein will be controversial and arguable. If this is true, then the paper has achieved another of its goals in sparking continued analysis and debate of the POW/MIA issue as an instrument of diplomacy at the strategic level.

¹JCRC was activated in Saigon in 1973 and was primarily responsible for POW/MIA search efforts in Indochina until it was absorbed into JTF-FA in 1992. The CIL was also established in Hawaii in 1973 with the mission of identifying remains. On 1 October 2003 the CIL and JTF-FA were combined under one headquarters which is designated the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC).

²James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 287.

³Bui Thi Huong, Tran Quan, and Truong Minh Dao, approved by John H. Wilson, *Grain and Feed January Rice Update 2005 GAIN Report #VM 5009* [Report On-Line]; (Hanoi, Vietnam: US Embassy, 7 February 2005); Internet; accessed 1 May 2005.

⁴United States Census Bureau, *Trade with Vietnam* [Report On-Line]; available from: www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5520.html; Internet; accessed 1 May 2005.

⁵Thomas Jandl, Project Director, "Vietnam Special Report," *The Washington Times*, 29 April 2005, special section.

⁶Pham Van Tra, "Vietnam: Building and sustaining People's Defense," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 36 (December 2004).

⁷Chandler C. Sherrell, "A Historical Analysis of United States Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Repatriation and Remains Recovery" (Thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 1998), 60.

⁸Willbanks, 182-183.

⁹Sherrell, 88-93.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 80.

¹¹Paul Mather, *M.I.A. Accounting for the Missing in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1994), xx.

¹²*Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹³*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴Richard H. Solomon, *Exiting Indochina, US Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement and Normalization with Vietnam* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000), 80.

¹⁵Mather, 10-11.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, xx.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of POW/MIA accounting efforts in Vietnam and relate these efforts to the actions, concerns, and goals of the United States in a broader sense. To do this, it is essential to review the existing literature on the subject. This chapter first reviews the relevant written materials available, starting with documents focused on POW/MIA accounting, moving on to sources which deal primarily with US-Vietnamese relations, and finally covering sources in newspapers and journals as well as government documents and other publications. No information from classified documents will be used.

Paul Mather's book, *MIA: Accounting for the Missing in Southeast Asia*, gives a superb synopsis of the history of POW/MIA accounting efforts in Southeast Asia. It is the most comprehensive work regarding this subject. It is especially helpful in covering the "dark age" of US-Vietnamese relations, during the Carter and Reagan administrations. It alludes to a desire by the United States government to normalize relations with the SRV in just three years after the fall of Saigon and implies that the fullest possible accounting of POW/MIAs was only one of a myriad of reasons why normalization was attractive to the United States.¹ This is important because it demonstrates how quickly the US government grasped the importance of maintaining ties with the region for reasons that reached beyond simply healing the personal wounds of the war.

A thesis on the topic of POW/MIA accountability and recovery was written at the US Army Command and General Staff College in 1998. The thesis, "A Historical Analysis of United States Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Repatriation and Remains

Recovery,” by Major Chandler C. Sherrell provides an excellent analysis of the negotiations between Vietnam and the United States involving the POW/MIA issue. It also outlines the diplomatic events which led to the formation of JCRC and JTF-FA. It provides a solid start point by outlining the diplomatic maneuvering between the US and Vietnam. However, it concentrates solely on the specific issue of MIA accounting and does not link this issue to subsequent bilateral relations and their effects on later US strategic actions. It focuses mainly on the idea that the United States was negotiating from a position of weakness during negotiations with the DRV and the difficulties in recovering remains just after the war. It only mentions JTF-FA once in its chapter on Vietnam, in the last paragraph. While MAJ Sherrell’s conclusions are very pertinent to the lack of US progress on the POW/MIA issue during the period of the Paris Accords and immediately following the war, they do not take subsequent accounting efforts into consideration.²

The most recent book on US-Vietnamese relations since the mid-1980s is *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodian Settlement and Normalization with Vietnam*, by Richard H. Solomon. This book focuses mainly on the negotiations in the 1980s and early 1990s involving Cambodia. Mr. Solomon was Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs during the first Bush administration and writes from a first person perspective. He does discuss the events leading to improved relations with Vietnam, but concentrates on the Cambodian problem, only covering the POW/MIA issue when it had a direct effect on this issue.³

In discussing the normalization of relations with Vietnam, Richard Solomon referenced another work, “Vietnam: Detours on the Road to Normalization” by Richard

T. Childress and Stephen Solarz, which was published in the book *Reversing Relations with Former Adversaries*, edited by C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode. While covering the topic of normalization with the SRV fairly well, this work should not be mistaken as unbiased history. It is heavily biased against the efforts of the executive branch of the US government while it states that “the most steady oversight of Vietnam-related matters since the end of the Vietnam War has taken place in the House of Representatives.”⁴ It implies that efforts at normalization by Democratic presidential administrations were not well thought out and showed weakness. It even presents actions moving towards normalization by Republican administrations as well meaning, but somewhat inefficient. Stephen Solarz was a Republican congressman and member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, which the work both directly and indirectly praises. Dr. Richard Childress also had served as the National Security Council’s Director for Asian Affairs in the mid-1980s and was heavily involved in the negotiations with the SRV. Additionally, this work overly simplifies the complicated nature of bilateral relations and speaks of both the US and Vietnamese governments as if their decision making processes were completely rational and transparent and not the bureaucratic entities that they really are.

Vietnam Joins the World is a compilation of essays edited by James W. Morley and Masashi Nishihara. It was printed in 1997. It devotes six pages to the POW/MIA issue as a prerequisite to normalizing relations, but does not go into any detail about US military engagement operations, nor how these operations related to ongoing diplomatic moves at the time. Additionally, this book was written before Secretary William Cohen’s and President William J. Clinton’s visits in 2000. Despite the fact that it is slightly dated,

this work is very comprehensive and contains excellent and detailed documentation analyzing the economy, social issues, the strategic setting, relations with Cambodia, China, and the ASEAN nations, as well as those with the US and Japan. It forms an excellent base for any examination of US-Vietnamese relations and is balanced in opinion due to the plethora of scholars that contributed.⁵

There are several theses which all have asked the question “What direction should the US take in its policy and strategy toward Vietnam? The most comprehensive and readily available are from the Naval Postgraduate School and were both written in 1991. Both Tenise Pettigrew⁶ and John Little Jr.⁷, give an excellent snapshot of the US-Vietnamese relationship just after the end of the Cold War and assert that the US should immediately and aggressively begin engaging Vietnam and expanding relations. Much of what they advocated has come to pass. The value of these theses is not in their conclusions and recommendations, but in the detailed snapshot of US government, economic, military, and public outlooks and beliefs in regard to Vietnam just before and just after the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is interesting that two separate individuals wrote on nearly the exact same topic within a one-year time frame and came to similar conclusions using different materials and different criteria and methods. This helps to validate their work, and implies that these are appropriate models for this type of analysis of US-Vietnamese relations.

Few newspaper, magazine, or journal articles directly address the connection between US military activities and diplomatic breakthroughs with Vietnam. However, many writers assume a direct connection without explaining why such an assumption was made. True, many important diplomatic announcements and visits are immediately

preceded by USPACOM activities involving POW/MIA accounting efforts. The only article that clearly addresses the relationship, “Vietnam Circles Closer to Military Ties to US”⁸, written by Elizabeth Becker for the *New York Times* on 26 April 2000, makes an overt claim, stating “Major Gaines’s [JTF Full Accounting] mission opened up the way to the first visit by an American defense secretary...” Ms. Becker is a writer for the *New York Times* who has focused on this arena and is quite versed in it, however, she is only a secondary source who is outside of the Department of Defense and can only provide limited analysis. She is well known by the POW/MIA search and accounting community and has been recommended by former members of the JTF Full Accounting and Vietnam Country Teams.⁹

There are several hundred other articles that address various events in the diplomacy between Vietnam and the US. They are somewhat useful for developing a cohesive timeline that can relate specific diplomatic events to US military accounting actions. However, they are limited in their usefulness in this respect because the press tended to address the POW/MIA issue only when major events were occurring or when a sensational claim was made. An example can be found in live “sighting events,” that is, whenever someone claimed to have seen a living POW still in Indochina. Despite this, they are most useful for examining trends in opinion and interest in the issue.

The most interesting factor to note about the news articles is how the tone has changed over time. This trend may help demonstrate the effects that the POW/MIA accounting efforts may have had on bilateral relations. Early articles focused on the threat of Vietnam as a militarized communist state and the problems of stability as related to the refugees. They presented no inclination that relations would ever be normalized. As time

passed, the emphasis changed to POW/MIA accounting activities and the need for the United States to forcefully deal with the issue. This slowly morphed into a public debate over when and if the US should normalize relations. The major debate was whether normalization should occur after full accounting of POW/MIAs was achieved in order to pressure the SRV government, thus using it to punish improper behavior or before cooperation in facilitating accounting efforts, and thus as an incentive. Once the media storm about the establishment of an embassy and the presidential visit by William J. Clinton subsided, articles shifted focus to domestic issues inside Vietnam and economic concerns with concerned, but benign, or even hopeful tones.

The *Senate Select POW-MIA Affairs Report*, which is well over 700 pages long is a treasure trove of compiled information on the subject and is essential to any study in this area. It is so comprehensive and detailed, that it difficult to adequately summarize. It covers the Senate Select Committee findings on the POW/MIA accounting efforts, gives a detailed background history, contains most, if not all testimonies given before Congress, and addresses the organizations in government that had worked on the issue. It also seems refreshingly unbiased and nonpartisan. It stays away from conjecture about living POWs, while not discounting any feasible possibilities for US-Vietnamese relations and accounting efforts. The fact that it is so focused and relatively unbiased alone speaks volumes on the importance that this subject has had to the voters, and thus the elected leadership of the United States.¹⁰

Key US Department of State dispatches provide good synopses of US activities and positions at different points in time. Those of 1 September 1988, 17 December 1990, and 31 December 1990 clearly state US strategy and objectives in dealing with Vietnam

at the time. Those of December 1990 lay out a specific roadmap for the normalization in no uncertain terms and are obviously directed towards the Government of Vietnam. That of 26 Apr 93 addresses the impact on relations caused by the release of a secret document from the files of the former USSR. This document alleged that nearly 800 living POWs disappeared between December 1972 and the release of POWs the following year. The document was later proven to be in error, but it seems that several months of progress in relations were lost because of it.¹¹

The most enlightening sources can be found in USPACOM and State Department historical records. Unfortunately, these very important documents remain classified and will not be declassified in the near future. Therefore they will not be used.

After 1986 the Executive branch was required to provide a yearly written National Security Strategy (NSS) to Congress. These documents provide a formal look at the concerns of the United States for the recent past. In doing so, they provide a gauge of the interest of the United States in fostering relations with foreign countries. Often they address positions relating to specific foreign countries directly.

The three National Security Strategies provided by the Clinton administration specifically mention the normalization and subsequent fostering of relations with Vietnam as part of a broader concept of engagement and subsequent expansion of a democratic free-market world.

The current National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the National Military Strategy (NMS) focus on the war against terrorism. However, a major role seems to be allotted to fostering relationships with “allies, partners, and friends” in order to produce an environment in which terrorism is unable to

function. Key to understanding the importance of this may not be what each document states, but how subordinate documents summarize them. For instance, the current National Military Strategy spends one paragraph of six sentences summarizing the National Security Strategy, of these two are related to fostering relations. Additionally, two of the four objectives identified in the NDS relate to international relations. Therefore, these documents are key to understanding any actions or options in respect to Vietnam.

Joint Publication 1 of the Department of Defense and related doctrinal publications provide a basis for the definition of those terms pertinent to strategic discussions.¹² When a specific definition of a strategic concept cannot be found in a DoD doctrinal publication, then one from those of Joseph Nye in his book *Understanding International Conflict* is used as a baseline. As this book is used as a primary beginning text book for officers specializing in strategic planning at the US Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), it provides a simple, yet useful, framework for this discussion.¹³

¹Paul Mather, *M.I.A. Accounting for the Missing in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1994).

²Chandler C. Sherrell, “A Historical Analysis of United States Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Repatriation and Remains Recovery” (Thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 1998).

³Richard H. Solomon, *Exiting Indochina, US Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement and Normalization with Vietnam* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000).

⁴Richard T. Childress and Stephen Solarz, “Vietnam: Detours on the Road to Normalization,” in *Reversing Relations with Former Adversaries*, ed. C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1988), 111.

⁵James W. Morley and Masashi Nishihara, eds., *Vietnam Joins the World* (London: East Gate, by M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

⁶Tenise L. Pettigrew, “The Changing Role of Vietnam in Southeast Asia: Beyond the Cold War” (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1991).

⁷John W. Little, Jr., “Vietnam in US Foreign Policy: An Association for the Strategic Balance in Southeast Asia” (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1991).

⁸Elizabeth Becker, “Vietnam Circles Closer to Military Ties to US,” *New York Times*, 26 April 2000.

⁹Colonel Thomas T. Smith former JTF-FA Detachment Commander in Hanoi, interview by the author, 18 November 2004.

¹⁰United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, “Senate Select POW-MIA Affairs Report,” reprinted in *Essential Documents of American History Essential Documents 1492-Present*, eds. Norman P. Desmarais and James H. McGovern of Providence College (New York: Great Neck Publishing, 2002).

¹¹United States Department of State, *Dispatches* (1 September 1988, 17 December 1990, and 31 December 1990).

¹²United States Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1 (14 November 2001).

¹³Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts,: An Introduction to Theory and History*, 5th ed. (New York: Pierson Longman , 2005).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of POW/MIA accounting efforts in Vietnam and relate these actions to the actions, concerns, and goals of the United States in a broader sense. This chapter describes the logic and methods that were used to analyze the information derived from the written sources described in Chapter 2 and personal interviews. It first outlines the general logic behind the analysis and then discusses the criteria for the selection of interviewees.

A combination of historical and evaluative methods are used to analyze the thesis question. By arranging the actions of USPACOM's JCRC, JTF-FA, and JPAC and the concurrent political, diplomatic, and economic events of the time period chronologically a pattern may be developed. POW/MIA accounting activities are linked to subsequent activities by virtue of their relation in time. A second method of linking strategic level elements such as the National Security Strategies with POW/MIA accounting actions is also possible after 1986, when the executive branch began publishing them as required by the amendment to section 108 of the National Security Act. Another key method is the leveraging of interviews which examined the perceptions of individuals directly involved with managing, coordinating, commanding, and controlling various aspects of USPACOM POW/MIA accounting missions.

Individuals were selected for interviews in a purposive manner based on the expectation of in-depth and personal knowledge about the subject. Criteria for selection included the position and duties of each individual as well as the time period that the served in POW/MIA accounting missions. The individuals selected as primary sources

for this paper were chosen for their seniority, rank, and maturity, as well as their unique perspectives on POW/MIA accounting operations. While the bias of every individual always must be considered, so must the professionalism of senior leaders and government employees be taken into account. Due to the limitations of time, only a limited number of individuals could be interviewed.

Interviews with JCRC, JTF-FA, and JPAC members, former members, and those currently serving in USPACOM are significant in their value as primary sources for this discussion. Surprisingly, the insights and perceptions of tactical level and midlevel managers also can provide an excellent source of strategic level insights. The emphasis that the leadership, at any and all levels in their chain of command, placed on certain aspects of the mission sheds an important light on the most important issues.

Mr. Johnie E. Webb Jr. is currently the Senior Advisor to the Commanding General of Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) of USPACOM. He started working this mission in 1975 as an Army Officer and has served on this mission in key positions ever since. Significantly, he served as the Commander of the Central Identification Laboratory (CIL). He participated in many negotiations with the Vietnamese throughout the entire period and led the first recovery operation into Vietnam in 1985. His depth of experience and knowledge give his views and statements carry great weight and credibility. His Army career with the accounting effort is unique, in that once he started working the mission in 1975, he was allowed to continue to work in it until his retirement. When he was hired as a civil servant, he began working the same mission. The fact that the Army normally moves its officers regularly, attests to how key Mr. Webb was to the operation.¹

Mr. James M. Coyle is currently the historical research director for JPAC. He speaks Vietnamese and served as an interpreter in many negotiations. His insights into the negotiations and activities are unique in that, as a skilled linguist, he had the ability to understand the nuances of the messages being communicated by the Vietnamese. This allowed him to comment knowledgeably on how the activities surrounding the POW/MIA accounting operations served as a conduit for “unofficial” communications between the US and SRV governments.²

Colonel Thomas T. Smith recently left JPAC after serving as the Detachment Commander in Hanoi. He served there from 2003 until 2004. Mr. Webb and several others working at JPAC identified him as one of the most effective officers who has served in that position. As the senior officer on the ground in Vietnam and as the individual responsible for the financial transactions of the operations there, he can shed light on some economic elements of engagement. He also provides a unique and detailed understanding of the way that the Vietnamese are currently organized to deal with US POW/MIA accounting missions and perceived interests.³

Mr. Kenneth Riggins is a retired Army Officer who served as a JTF FA Team Chief in the 1990s. He is an excellent source of insight from the junior leader and middle-management perspective. His views provide the perspective of a mission executer unclouded by the political concerns which those working at higher levels would take into consideration. The issues which are emphasized to the junior personnel on a mission can be prime indicators of the primary concerns of the higher echelon leadership.⁴

Major Roger Cavazos is a US Army Foreign Area Officer (FAO) currently working the J-5 of USPACOM. His interview provided insight into how USPACOM

views the utility of POW/MIA accounting operations to serve as an engagement tool with foreign governments other than Vietnam.⁵ Unfortunately, during the time period of this research, officers from the USPACOM J-5 Vietnam desk were not available for comment due to ongoing operations in support of tsunami disaster relief.

A semistructured written protocol was used for interviews. Written questions were prepared to guide the flow of the interviews, but much leeway was given to the interviewees. Questions were also specifically tailored to the individuals interviewed. Base questions focused on linking POW/MIA accounting efforts to other US government diplomatic, economic, and political issues. Interviewees were asked direct questions about any perceived links, as well as what value their higher leadership placed on US-Vietnamese relationships and perceptions. Those who were involved early in the POW/MIA accounting efforts were asked about any indications of the POW/MIA accounting operations being used as an unofficial means of diplomatic government-to-government communication. Questions varied based upon the interviewee and the conversation flowed naturally, while generally remaining limited to US-Vietnamese relations and POW/MIA recovery efforts.

¹Mr. Johnie Webb, Senior Advisor to the Commanding General, JPAC, interview by author, 18 February 2005.

²Mr. James M. Coyle, Historical Research Director, JPAC, interview by the author, 18 February 2005.

³Colonel Thomas T. Smith former JTF-FA Detachment Commander in Hanoi, interview by the author, 18 November 2004.

⁴Mr. Kenneth Riggins, former JTF-FA Team Leader, interview by the author, 16 November 2004.

⁵Major Roger Cavazos, USPACOM J-5, Foreign Area Officer, China, interviewed by the author, 18 February 2005.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

This chapter examines four specific ways in which POW/MIA accounting efforts may have facilitated the diplomatic efforts to normalize relations between the United States and the SRV. These four ways include: how the operations may have provided an alternate means of diplomatic communication; if the effort provided the United States with improved information about the concerns of and workings of a closed and enigmatic government; if the effort helped to ready the US populace for normalization; and how expenditures on accounting efforts may have had positive effects on bilateral relations with Vietnam.

MIA Accounting Efforts as an Alternate Means of Diplomatic Communication

One of the most obvious ways that the MIA accounting efforts aided in the diplomatic arena was by providing a forum for informal communications between the governments of the United States and Vietnam.

Between 1975 and 1979, the United States was open to serious negotiations with the ultimate objective of normalizing relations.¹ However, despite exploratory gestures by the Ford administration and more conciliatory gestures by the Carter administration, the Vietnamese ultimately rejected immediate cooperation on every issue. Their timing would prove unfortunate for the SRV due to the improvement of Chinese-US relations. When the Carter administration was forced to make a choice between concentrating diplomatic efforts on China or its adversary Vietnam, direct government-to-government

dialogue between the United States and the SRV largely became limited to POW/MIA accounting efforts.

When the United States began to place improving Chinese relations ahead of Vietnamese relations, the POW/MIA issue would prove to be one of the few means left at the disposal of the Vietnamese to keep the United States diplomatically engaged. Furthermore, this engagement was perceived by the leadership of the SRV, at least partially, to be under their control. In fact, Richard Solomon, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, states bluntly, “Despite Vietnam’s strategic dependence on the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the Reagan administration maintained a low-level dialogue with Hanoi *because of unresolved concerns about the fate of American servicemen still missing from the war years*” (emphasis mine).²

Why the cooling of relations occurred is not as important as the fact that it happened and that the remaining opportunities for dialogue were predominantly focused on the POW/MIA accounting issue. It is debatable as to whether US engagement efforts dried up because of a conscious choice to spurn the Vietnamese in favor of China, or because the SRV’s negotiating positions, such as those regarding war reparations were unfeasible, or because damning information about the stockpiling of remains was revealed by a defecting Vietnamese mortician³ at that time. No matter what the reason, evidence shows that US-SRV communications revolved around issues involving POW/MIA accounting efforts.⁴ The record of official delegations between 1979 and the visit of General (ret.) Vessey Jr. to Vietnam in 1987, gives the impression that almost every official policy visits by US officials to Vietnam used the POW/MIA issue as a focal point for cooperation and policy discussions. Most of those interviewed, who were

directly involved in the POW/MIA accounting effort, singled out General Vessey's visit to Hanoi as the major turning point in Vietnamese cooperation on the POW/MIA accounting issue.⁵ In this, they mirror the tone of Paul Mather's book, which gives significant credit to General Vessey's effectiveness.⁶

In contrast to Mather, Tenise Pettigrew and John Little Jr. identify Secretary of State James A. Baker III's announcement of the withdrawal of US recognition of the Khmer Rouge faction 18 July 1990 in Paris as the overall turning point in relations in their theses on US strategic options in respect to Vietnam. Tenise Pettigrew specifically states that this date is selected because it marked a new period of diplomatic initiatives between United States and the SRV, which for the first time since the Paris Accords, did not include the POW/MIA issue as a centerpiece.⁷

Both James Coyle, a Vietnamese linguist and long-time member of JPAC and its predecessors, and Johnie Webb, who is currently the Senior Advisor to the Commanding General of JPAC and has been a key player in the accounting effort since 1975, were party to many of the technical negotiations and meetings of this period. They commented in their interviews that the Vietnamese continually used JCRC and JTF-FA meetings, which were being held solely to discuss POW/MIA accounting efforts, as an opportunity to give make specific points about many other US-Vietnamese issues that were of importance at the moment, but were not directly related to POW/MIA issues. In their opinion, the Vietnamese did this with the full understanding that a report of the meeting would be forwarded through channels to the US policy makers, who were always quite interested in the progress of POW/MIA accounting efforts due to their importance to the United States as a whole.⁸ It appears that the Vietnamese knew that the POW/MIA issue

would engage the United States even when little progress was being made on other bilateral or multilateral issues.

The Vietnamese government officials immediately grasped the importance of missing service members to the United States. According to Johnie Webb, the Vietnamese began collecting information and were possibly even stockpiling the remains of our missing from a very early date. Taking part in, or being party to most of the POW/MIA accounting negotiations with the SRV from 1983 until today, he believes that the Vietnamese recognized that the issue of the missing was a guaranteed way of keeping the United States engaged.⁹ Compelling evidence exists that the Vietnamese did stockpile remains of US service members in the hopes of someday using them to gain concessions from, or at least favor with the United States.¹⁰ If this indeed is the case, some may speculate that the reason that Vietnamese stockpiled the remains was for purely monetary gain. Vietnamese representatives often referred to a letter from President Nixon to Prime Minister Pham Van Dong dated 1 February 1973 which they allege promised several billion dollars in aid, which they view as reparations. However, Mr. Webb believes that Vietnamese strategy for the withholding of remains was much better thoughtout than to be based on this alone.¹¹ For instance, they may have seen how countries such as North Korea had been marginalized and wished to avoid such a fate. However, they failed to take two things into account. First, that we would so rapidly side with China against the Soviet block, even if that meant indirectly supporting such factions as the Khmer Rouge, and second, how much influence that their actions would have on US public opinion, and how much that opinion mattered to our elected officials. It seems that they may have failed to understand until much later that what mattered to the people of the United States

was not the value of the bodies as objects, but the ramifications of the issue as they pertained to the families of the missing and their sustained interest in receiving final closure on the issue.

It would be erroneous to say that the POW/MIA issue was the only thing that kept the two countries engaged. At the time at least two other pressing issues, the flood of refugees from Vietnam and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, forced diplomatic communication. However, while there was communication on these issues, the issue of POW/MIA accountability remained the steady constant. It also provided a negotiating forum in which informal low-impact messages could be sent to the US government through such events as technical meetings. Both sides benefited; the SRV was able to continue dialogue and contact, while the United States was able to communicate in a forum and in a manner which would not send an erroneous signal to other countries, such as those of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹² Sending such a signal to ASEAN, that the normalization of relations was soon pending, could have had several different consequences. It could have unnecessarily alarmed countries like Thailand, who perceived a Vietnamese hegemony over former French Indochina as a threat, thus forcing them farther into the arms of the Chinese. In fact, Thailand already had drawn much closer to the PRC starting in 1975. It may also have triggered a wave of premature economic investment in the SRV, beyond the limited amount that was already occurring, thus weakening the US negotiating position by alleviating some economic pressure on the hard-line government.

While a critical issue in the normalization process, the importance of the dialogues over the issue of Cambodia should not marginalize the importance of the

communications that the POW/MIA accounting effort facilitated prior to 1990. Citing the fact that 18 July 1990 is often used as the turning point in US-Vietnamese relations, one may argue that it was the Cambodia issue that broke the diplomatic impasse between the United States and the SRV. For instance, Richard Solomon focuses on the Cambodia issue and holds it up as the major issue, while addressing the POW/MIA accounting efforts as a supporting effort. This should not be surprising, considering the focus of his book and viewpoint as a major player in the Cambodia settlement. Whereas this assumption is true to some extent, it ignores the important role that the POW/MIA effort played in facilitating communications up until that time. Although this facilitation of dialogue may not have been the sole key factor in the thawing of relations, the low-level exchanges at such events as technical meetings did play an important supporting role, allowing diplomatic exchanges to continue in a unique environment.

It is easier to understand why the Vietnamese refugee problem did not provide the same opportunity for communications as the POW/MIA issue when it is considered as a myriad of interrelated, but different problems with similar effects instead of a single homogeneous issue. For instance, immediately after the fall of Saigon in 1975, there was a flood of political refugees seeking to escape the vengeance of the communists towards those who supported the government of the RVN. A later group of refugees was composed of ethnic Chinese who were attempting to escape an environment of racial prejudice. These came from a Chinese minority that had composed a mercantile class for hundreds of years in Vietnam, but were now forced to flee due to recently resurfacing anti-Chinese sentiments exacerbated by the 1979 Chinese invasion. A third wave was caused by the disastrous economic policy of the Le Duan period with its dependency on

handouts from the Soviet block. A fourth group, closely related but distinct from the initial political refugees, was made up of individuals who had survived time in communist reeducation camps, were released, and now sought the security of a refugee camp over life in the communist state. Some of these had even been former supporters of the DRV or the Viet Cong during the war. The issue of Amerasian children also grabbed the heartstrings of the US public and added another dimension to the plethora of refugee related problems.

Although many people would group these individuals into one broad, group called “refugees,” they legally are considered different. Whether they could be granted refugee status depended on the laws of the country that they emigrated to, the status granted by the United Nations, and many other legal factors too broad to cover here. Add to this the number of first asylum nations, such as Thailand, Malaysia, the then British colony of Hong Kong, and the number of receiving nations, like the United States, Australia, and even Norway, and one can see why this issue did not provide the best stepping stone for *bilateral* relations between the United States and the SRV. This issue was not clearly defined and easily limited to the two primary nations, whereas the POW/MIA issue was. Communication did occur, and the United States and the SRV did implement and expand the Orderly Departure Program. However, this program was a matter of necessity in addressing immediate and pressing problems, not a premeditated option as part of a long-term strategic plan of engagement by either side.

As one can see, the POW/MIA issue was unique in the fact that it provided a forum for communications and discussion in which both nations could feel relatively unthreatened in their level of control of the talks in a moderately low-key, routine

environment. The other major issues for discussion at the time could not have provided such an opportunity. Cambodia was an ongoing occupation and civil war involving significant third parties: China and their Khmer Rouge associates, Thailand, and two other Cambodian factions. The refugee issue highlighted the weaknesses of the communist state and also would have included third parties. Straight forward talks solely on normalization economic issues and incentives probably would have been unacceptable to the US public. Moreover, talks on these issues would have sent signals to ASEAN which would have broken Vietnam's relative isolation outside the Soviet block or increased communist Chinese influence; an highly undesirable outcome for the containment of communist influence in the region.

Thus, we can see that the POW/MIA issue provided a channel of communications that was acceptable to both parties. As noted above, those in Congress and elsewhere at the strategic level, such as Mr. Solarz and Mr. Solomon, acknowledge the importance of the opportunities for engagement provided by POW/MIA issue. Furthermore, those directly involved in the negotiations at an operational level openly attest to the way that the Vietnamese delegations used policy meetings focused on POW/MIA matters to develop other issues. The way that the Vietnamese possibly stockpiled remains, or in the very least, the way in which they lethargically recovered and slowly returned them, not only for US concessions, but to simply keep up continued talks and contact indicates that the Vietnamese recognized that this issue was not only valuable for basic monetary gain, but as a special tool of diplomatic engagement.

Using the POW/MIA Issue as a Barometer for Vietnamese Interest and
Cooperation as Well as a Window into a Closed Government

To some degree the POW/MIA accounting efforts have provided a useful tool in gauging the level of interest that the leadership of the Communist Party of the SRV had in bettering relations with the United States. This was especially important in dealing with a secretive single-party state, like the SRV, which still viewed the United States with great suspicion.

While the demise of the USSR is often and rightly tied to the change in attitude of the government of the SRV, the trend towards a foreign policy less dependant upon the Soviet block and leaning more towards ASEAN and the West can be found well before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although it is very difficult to determine to what specific degree the POW/MIA accounting efforts were used to take measure of the underlying attitudes and trends in the SRV regime, they did provide an opportunity to gain first-hand information of the workings of the closed state.

According to Paul Mather, “despite (their) stated position,” there was “no doubt in the minds of those who had frequent contact with Vietnamese officials that normalization of relations with the United States was an eagerly sought goal.” He goes on to state that Vietnamese comments at technical meetings were “often a precursor of new Vietnamese initiatives.” Mr. Mather also speaks of the uneasiness that the Vietnamese had with being so dependant upon their Soviet allies.¹³ Whether this was because of the ongoing economic problems in Vietnam, where even malnutrition was common, or because of the Soviet’s demonstrated unwillingness or relative impotence in countering the Chinese attack of 1979 is not a critical issue to this discussion. What matters is the fact that the United States was given the opportunity to better understand the concerns and

motivations of a closed state due to the contacts afforded by the POW/MIA accounting effort.

What is clear now, that was not entirely clear when Mr. Mather was publishing his book in 1992, was that during the time period from which he was discussing these indicators, a major changing of the guard was taking place in the Vietnamese Communist Party. Le Duan, the successor to Ho Chi Minh had passed away and major changes were afoot. The POW/MIA effort was giving the United States an idea of the direction that the SRV was taking, allowing it to adjust its diplomatic actions. Thus, in a very subtle way, the POW/MIA accounting efforts allowed the United States to judge the new direction that the SRV was taking after the death of Le Duan and the adaptation of the *doi moi*¹⁴ policy at the critical Sixth Party Congress of 1986. Arguably, this would have been readily apparent without the POW/MIA engagement efforts; however, as demonstrated by our failure to adequately predict the collapse of the Soviet Union and our misreading of the seriousness of the split between Beijing and Moscow in 1959, the value of such insight into a closed totalitarian regime should never be underestimated.

POW/MIA accounting efforts also allowed the United States to better understand the bureaucracy of the government of the SRV. COL Thomas T. Smith, served as the JTF-FA Detachment Commander in Hanoi and as such was authorized to negotiate directly with the government of the SRV on POW/MIA accounting matters. He stated that every official meeting had to have a representative from the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior/Public Security, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Understanding the relationship between these ministries, the concerns of each, and the internal workings of each was extremely important to the JTF-FA mission.¹⁵ Both he and

Kenneth Riggins also discussed the importance of understanding of the relationship of the national government with the governments of the provinces and other local leaders. This is the type of cultural and organizational awareness and understanding that the US Departments of State and Defense must have to effectively develop feasible diplomatic engagement strategies, as well as security cooperation plans for dealing with a foreign government. Without the POW/MIA accounting efforts and negotiations, Vietnam would have appeared to be an even more shadowy and sinister place. This may have resulted in a much more prolonged and painful normalization process, with additional missteps and even more US government and public suspicion.

POW/MIA Accounting Efforts Readied the US Populace for the
Normalization of Relations with a Distrusted Former Enemy

From a political perspective, the MIA issue may have provided a useful tool in readying the US public for the reestablishment of relations with Vietnam. Without some way of clearly and concretely demonstrating to the public that the government of Vietnam deserved increased engagement from the United States, the normalization of relations may have taken decades rather than years. The fact that a nongovernment civilian from the Nation League of Families was placed on the POW/MIA Interagency Working Group (IAG) clearly demonstrated the absolute necessity of community “buy-in” with an acceptable level of public confidence for any agreement with this former adversary. Another example of this public relations effort can be found in the fact that, in support of this POW/MIA accounting effort, more US government files and records were declassified more rapidly than any other time in history.¹⁶

Despite the fact that POW/MIA accounting efforts readied the public for the normalization of relations, it cannot be stressed enough that the primary focus of almost every government agency seemed to be accounting for the missing and the recovery of remains in fulfillment of the goals established by the government as dictated by the will of the US populace. When this paper states “readying the US public” it specifically refers to overcoming the distrust and hatred normally associated with relations involving a nation against which one has fought a long drawn-out war. The public would never “buy-in” to the normalization of relations with a nation that did not offer some indication of remorse and trustworthiness. The majority of the US public did not understand the Vietnamese veneration of ancestors and probably did not accept it as sufficient evidence of good intentions. The US public also, some may say selfishly, was not taking the thousands of Vietnamese missing into account and how this affected SRV positions.

Before the thawing of bilateral US-Vietnamese relations in the 1990s, seldom did the POW/MIA issue seem to be separated from the normalization of relations, and this was usually redressed quickly. One example was in a statement by Chairman Leonard Woodcock in his report to President Carter upon returning from Vietnam in 1977. Mr. Woodcock had been selected as Chairman of a Presidential Commission on this and other related issues. He stated that his commission had told the Vietnamese that “it was the US intent to remove this issue as a barrier to (the) normalization of relations.” This statement was widely interpreted to mean that normalization took precedence over the POW/MIA issue. This small lapse in directly connecting the satisfaction on the POW/MIA accounting issue to normalization and making normalization dependant upon POW/MIA closure may seem innocuous. However, it produced an immediate firestorm of public

outcry in editorials and from such groups as the League of Families, which may have made the US government's decision to continue to court Chinese relations over those of the Vietnamese even easier.¹⁷

As public servants of a democratic nation, the leaders in the government of the United States are often constrained by the demands and opinions of the voting population of the country. These demands can significantly restrict the actions and policies available to the executive branch. Actions that may seem to be logical from a purely realistic perspective are often constrained by other cultural or moralistic concerns. Although our leaders may not allow these concerns to restrict their actions in every specific case, they often do. This public influence is readily apparent when a longer period of time is examined. One example is a trend of the United States military to place more and more emphasis of reducing the number of noncombatant casualties and collateral damage during combat since World War II. The effects of public opinion can also be seen in our most central policy documents. President Clinton's 2000 National Security Strategy contains an entire section devoted to explaining three specific levels of threats to national security and the basic criteria for the commitment of our military. This is an example of self-constraint by the executive branch in order to better assure "buy-in" by the US public in the event of a conflict. While they may often seem annoying to those formulating policy, these constraints and restrictions should not be viewed as strictly detrimental to the cause of the nation in the long run.

Strategically, when viewed from a short-sighted and purely utilitarian perspective, one may come to the conclusion that the US strategic position is somewhat hindered by the current trend towards expending significant resources on recovery efforts; this is not a

logical conclusion when the situation and policy-making process is taken as a whole. While such decisions on the tactical level are often situation dependent, at higher levels decisions to pursue broad-based policies are usually not. Strategic policy decisions are not developed in a simplistic rational process, but in a complicated bureaucratic model, which is ultimately based upon the selections of the voting public at the polls. The public opinion currently seems to tend towards the fullest possible accounting and recovery of our lost service members from day one. Perhaps it is best summarized by Richard Childress and Stephan Solarz, that all diplomatic and economic initiatives, “which in any other context would be evaluated on their intrinsic merits--all become intertwined with the concept of healing” in the minds of the public when it comes to Vietnam.¹⁸

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the moral implications of fullest possible MIA accounting policies as it is to discuss the long-term strategic implications of such a trend. Its purpose is to examine how such a constraining factor as the demand of the US public for the fullest possible accounting of its missing service members from the Vietnam War was actually leveraged as a tool of diplomatic strength in the efforts to engage with, modify the behavior of, and ultimately normalize the relations with a former adversary.

The effect of POW/MIA accounting efforts on public acceptance of renewed contact with Vietnam can also be established in the general change in tone of newspaper, journal, and magazine articles between 1980 and the present and the fact that the subjects of their articles were primarily focused on POW/MIA accounting efforts and not economic or other strategic concerns. However, this is not to say that the POW/MIA issue has left the stage. While the majority of articles now appear to have turned towards

economic and security cooperation, there are still many on the subject. That the USPACOM understood this dynamic can be seen in the scrutiny that was placed on JTF FULL ACCOUNTING reports on the level of cooperation that was afforded by the Vietnamese government.

When General John Vessey Jr. was appointed as President Reagan's Special Emissary to Vietnam on POW/MIA Affairs in 1987, the administration took an additional, even more amazing step: it began to include representatives of the National League of Families in diplomatic efforts involving POW/MIAs.¹⁹ A representative of the League was subsequently included on the IAG. This group has the unusual distinction of being one of the longest enduring working groups in Washington, existing since January 1980. The longevity of the Group is a testament to the political importance of the POW/MIA issue and the unprecedented inclusion of a representative from an independent nongovernment organization indicates the importance of public acceptance of related diplomatic initiatives.²⁰ The importance of including representatives from this private group into the IAG also is stressed by Richard Solomon.

The US public immediately concluded that the SRV could not be trusted in issues involving POW/MIAs and the return of remains and this helped to lay the basis for the US public's uncomfortable feelings about normalizing relations with the SRV. The North Vietnamese use of POWs for unsavory propaganda purposes during the war not only made some very simple political statements, but it grabbed the attention of the US public in a manner which was not experienced in prior conflicts. The citizens of the United States at once began to place a great amount of emphasis on the POW/MIA issue after the closing of the war in Vietnam. Some of this aura of distrust and uncertainty may also

have been brought about by the fact that the ordeal continued for two years after the withdrawal of major US forces in 1973 and the simple fact that it ended in a clear-cut defeat. Negotiations with the Vietnamese over the return of POWs and remains had been dragging on for years. With the coming to power of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the ethnic tension within the SRV, the exodus of various peoples from all of former French Indochina, and finally the invasion of Vietnam by China in 1979 all things seemed to be part of a chaotic unsolvable mess. Nongovernment players, such as LTC (Ret.) James “Bo” Gritz, fueled this fire with their individual beliefs; rumors abounded and little could be done to dispel them in the prevailing chaos. Such chaos did nothing to curtail the aura of distrust, uncertainty, or even conspiracy that surrounded the POW/MIA issue.

Despite the desires of the US public to achieve the fullest possible accounting of their missing service members, the United States was negotiating from a position of weakness. Negotiations with the North Vietnamese had been conducted with one supremely flawed assumption--that the US-backed Republic of Vietnam would continue to exist. When South Vietnam fell in 1975, and US domestic issues and factors would not allow further US military intervention, the fate of the missing was largely placed in the hands of the SRV.²¹

Economic Benefits Provided to Vietnam for POW/MIA Accounting Efforts
Had Positive Effects on Bilateral Relations and
Encouraged Broader Cooperation

The amount of benefit derived from economic aid incentives and the money spent on the MIA search seem to have had a positive effect, which may have been disproportional to the money spent. Until recently, the preponderance of money given by the government of the United States to the SRV has either been in the form of funds

directly used in the search for and the recovery of the remains of missing US service members or in aid which was somehow linked to progress on the POW/MIA issue or related negotiations.

In 2003, the budget of the JTF-FA mission in Hanoi was \$12 million. This eclipsed the budgets of all other US government organizations in Vietnam including the embassy. At the time, the USAID budget for Vietnam was only around \$10 million.²² This may seem like a huge figure when taken alone; however, in 2003 bilateral trade between the United States and the SRV was approximately \$6 billion. Even more, it pales in comparison with the overall defense budget of the United States.

When discussing the POW/MIA issue in respect to the motivations of the Vietnamese government, each individual interviewed eventually said something to the effect that “it is all about money.”²³ In other words, that this was what the SRV was concerned about and this was the prime way of influencing their behavior. This has been true since the beginning of the process at the time of the Paris Accords. Although the *Senate Select POW-MIA Affairs Report* found no evidence of the Vietnamese ever proposing a blatant exchange of missing service members for money,²⁴ most of their demands in the early period centered on reparations. According to the report:

The clearest indication that the North Vietnamese continued to link POW/MIA provisions with a commitment for US aid during the latter stages of negotiations occurred on 26 Sep. 1972. During a negotiation session on that date, Dr. Kissinger asked for assurances that all American prisoners, including those in Lao (*sic*) and Cambodia, would be returned as a result of the agreement. Le Duc Tho responded by saying: “. . . if you satisfactorily resolve the political question and the question of reparations, then we can find an understanding.”²⁵

As Le Duc Tho’s statement indicates, the Vietnamese party linked reparations to the POW/MIA accounting issue very early. However, the US negotiating team purposely

strove to avoid linking economic issues with humanitarian POW/MIA issues. This controversy was never settled either during or after the Paris Accords. On 1 February 1973 President Nixon sent a secret personal note to the DRV Premier Pham Van Dong which promised \$3.25 billion in “postwar reconstruction” “without any political considerations. Whether this note was and is a binding agreement remains very controversial, especially in light of the North Vietnamese breaking the spirit of the peace accords in the final offensive of 1975, and is outside the scope of this study. The importance lies in what the Vietnamese believed and in the early connection of monetary factors to the POW/MIA issue and the US refusal to pay reparations based upon what it viewed as flawed peace accords.

The POW/MIA accounting effort provided a vehicle in which the SRV could achieve economic goals and receive aid monies from the United States, but in which it did not force the US government to pay overt reparations and lose face with its voting populace. The United States saw economic incentives as acceptable only in conjunction with progress in recovering its lost service members. The SRV could show material gain, though the morality of this method is questionable.

As mentioned above, the release of remains and cooperation in POW/MIA accounting efforts were probably not simply tools for short-term economic gain, but this was a significant part of their usage. Evidence of the importance of the economic instrument in this situation can be found in the first real breakthrough in Vietnamese cooperation. This was the visit by the Special Emissary to Vietnam on POW/MIA Affairs, General (ret.) John Vessey Jr., to Hanoi in 1987. Accompanying General Vessey’s negotiating team was a team of prosthetics experts whose mission was to

determine what aid could be given to the SRV to help those who had lost limbs during the war.

The recommendations of this group were adopted and \$100,000 worth of equipment used to manufacture prosthetic devices was shipped. Within one year several more tons of related equipment was sent.²⁶ Johnie Webb stated in the interview that he granted that the Vietnamese thought that the appointment of a Presidential Emissary and his subsequent actions indicated that “this was going to be it,” and that additional aid and a lifting of the trade embargo was eminent. They began turning over larger numbers of remains and cooperating better with search efforts. However, when significant further aid was not forthcoming, cooperation began to subside, despite continued diplomatic efforts by the United States.²⁷ It once again picked up with the announcement by Secretary Baker in 1990. This pattern of give and take continued for several years. During these years, the only hard-money incentive that was provided to the SRV by the United States, outside of monies spent on search and recovery efforts, was a \$1.3 million grant to assist war-disabled Vietnamese.²⁸ However, more detailed primary research into US government financial records to better substantiate this is needed.

More important to this study than these long term economic objectives and large grants, were the economic incentives which were the direct result of MIA search and recovery efforts, which were realized by the Vietnamese at a much lower level than those noted thus far. We have seen that one of the overarching motivations for the Vietnamese government was to lift the trade embargo and normalize relations for the benefit of their economy. Also we noted that smaller monetary grants and other forms of aid were incentives. However, the POW/MIA accounting effort provided incentives directly to

local Vietnamese economies through the monies spent by the JTF-FA search teams in their local contracting. This is an economic aspect of the accounting operations which is more difficult to identify and does not make itself readily apparent until the perceptions of the team leaders and detachment commanders are considered. This is because they are spent in relatively small quantities and are seldom announced as are large grants and aid packages.

Evidence of the importance that the Vietnamese placed on these monies can be found in the manner in which the Vietnamese government deals with them. In order to understand this, one must consider an example provided by Colonel Smith, the former JTF-FA Detachment Commander in Hanoi as it relates to the recent economic situation in Vietnam.²⁹ According to the *Vietnam 2004 Countrywatch Review*, the per Capita GDP for the SRV in 2002 was \$1,847, this is a marked increase from the era of the initial visits by General Vessey in the late 1980s. It indicates a per capita productivity of between \$5 and \$6 per day. Regional difference must also be taken into account. Remote highland regions, for instance may have average daily salaries of just around \$2. These figures can be interpreted in several different ways by economists, but this detailed analysis of this type is not necessary for this study. What is important for us to understand is the simple fact that they show a very low average income for workers in Vietnam. This gives us some idea of the economic power, and thus influence of an organization such as JTF-FA, that is willing and able to spend well over \$10 million yearly on recovery operations. The cost for local workers that was agreed to between the United States and the SRV when accounting operations first began in the late 1980s was \$30 per worker per day. This agreed fee had not changed as of 2003.

These monies were not paid as wages to the individual workers. They were paid to the socialist government in Hanoi. Only a portion of the money would go to the workers. The amount depended on the local economy of the region in question and well as that relationship between that region's leadership and the central government in Hanoi. It is common for people to immediately come to the conclusion that the sole reason that the individual workers did not receive the entire amount was because the central government was keeping most of it for itself and the benefit of higher government officials. While this may be predominantly true, we may never know the details of the cash flow, there are two other reasons that the full sum is not given to the worker. One reason is that injecting such huge sums of money into a relatively poor local economy for a limited duration would be terribly disruptive to local inflation, destabilizing the local economy and thus local government, especially in the poorer highland regions. The second reason is that it is not just the central government that is taking the rest of the money. Each regional government and local government also takes a certain amount. Depending on the local leaders, much of the money is actually used on public works projects to the benefit of the local community. Thus local leaders can improve their standing with their people at the expense of the United States, and to some extent, at the expense of the local government in Hanoi.

In addition to the basic wages of the workers, many expendable items and materials would be brought in by the JTF-FA team. It often was not cost effective for JTF-FA to remove much of these used materials after a recovery mission was completed. It would include such things as bamboo, plywood, tarps, used gloves and many other relatively low-cost items. Sometimes a small works project would have to be completed

in order to facilitate a recovery mission. This may have included such installing a small water tank at a remote site for safe drinking water or a small foot bridge. To us in the United States such used materials may seem worthless, and such works projects may seem trivial; however to a local village at a remote jungle or mountain site such materials have a great many uses and are often difficult to come by and the small public works projects would be well beyond the ability of the local government to finance.

Such relatively small expenditures in the accounting effort lead relatively quickly to a situation in which a large segment of the leadership at every level of government from local village chiefs to the provincial government to Hanoi itself now had an interest in the accounting effort, and were probably influenced towards supporting and pushing for a normalization of relations with the United States.³⁰

Therefore, one can see that the relatively small expenditures of, and in support of, the POW/MIA accounting effort most definitely had an influence on the initial steps towards the normalization of relations in the form of aid and grants and probably had a significant influence in placing pressure on the central government to expedite normalization indirectly through local expenditures.

Chapter Summery

Thus, we have seen how the POW/MIA accounting effort affected the overall diplomatic effort in the areas of communications, situational awareness, internal political acceptance, and economic influence. It facilitated communications by offering an alternate means of correspondence. It increased situational awareness by providing first hand information about the concerns and workings of the SRV government at a time of heightened tensions and suspicion. Internal political acceptance of any agreement with

the SRV may not have been possible without cooperation on the MIA issue giving some sense of progress, if not complete closure and final justice, to the US public. Finally, the efforts may have influenced the process positively through both overt and subtle economic means.

Understanding how the POW/MIA accounting effort affected the overall diplomatic initiatives in these four ways now enables conclusions to be drawn about the significance of the role that the effort played in the larger strategic movement towards the normalization of relations. It also makes it possible to determine what overarching lessons in the area of strategy may be derived from this experience. It also draws attention to the fact that much more detailed primary research needs to be conducted in this area, specifics of which will be covered in chapter 5.

¹Richard T. Childress and Stephen Solarz, "Vietnam: Detours on the Road to Normalization," in *Reversing Relations with Former Adversaries*, ed. C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1988), 92-93.

²Richard H. Solomon, *Exiting Indochina: US Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement and Normalization with Vietnam* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000), 80-81

³In 1979 an ethnically Chinese refugee from Vietnam claimed to be a mortician who had worked with the remains of over 400 US servicemen which were being stored in Vietnam. His testimony appeared to be truthful and his identity was corroborated by French sources. He subsequently testified before Congress about these remains.

⁴Paul Mather, *M.I.A. Accounting for the Missing in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1994), 86 and 148.

⁵Mr. Johnie Webb, Senior Advisor to the Commanding General, JPAC, interview by the author, 18 February 2005; Mr. James M. Coyle, Historical Research Director, JPAC, interview by the author, 18 February 2005; and Colonel Thomas T. Smith former JTF-FA Detachment Commander in Hanoi, interview by the author, 18 November 2004.

⁶Mather, 186.

⁷Tenise L. Pettigrew, “The Changing Role of Vietnam in Southeast Asia: Beyond the Cold War” (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1991), 29; and John W. Little Jr., “Vietnam in US Foreign Policy: An Association for the Strategic Balance in Southeast Asia” (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1991), 1.

⁸Coyle; and Webb.

⁹Webb.

¹⁰Mather, 84-87.

¹¹Webb.

¹²Childress and Solarz, 96.

¹³Mather, 152.

¹⁴Doi Moi is translated as “fundamental renovation.”

¹⁵Kenneth Riggins, former JTF-FA Team Leader, interview by the author, 16 November 2004.

¹⁶United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, “Senate Select POW-MIA Affairs Report,” reprinted in *Essential Documents of American History Essential Documents 1492-Present*, eds. Norman P. Desmarais and James H. McGovern of Providence College (New York: Great Neck Publishing, 2002), Exec. Summary, 3.

¹⁷Mather, 55.

¹⁸Richard T. Childress and Stephen Solarz, 88.

¹⁹United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, 109 of 614.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 190-196.

²¹Chandler C. Sherrell, “A Historical Analysis of United States Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Repatriation and Remains Recovery” (Thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 1998), 60.

²²Smith.

²³Smith; Webb; Coyle; and Riggins.

²⁴United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, 23 of 614.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶Mather, 159.

²⁷Webb.

²⁸United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, 263 of 614.

²⁹Smith.

³⁰Denise Youngblood Coleman, editor-in-chief, *Vietnam Countrywatch Review* (Houston: Countrywatch Incorporated, 2004), 30.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will first answer the primary question: Did the POW/MIA accounting effort play a significant role in opening up relations between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam? It will then suggest some lessons that can be learned from the diplomatic aspects of the POW/MIA accounting effort in Vietnam. Finally, it will recommend further studies that should be conducted to further expand our understanding of this important issue.

Chapter 4 examined several different ways that the MIA accounting efforts facilitated diplomatic engagement between the United States and the SRV. Now that each of these issues has been considered individually, it is worth examining how these interrelate in the wider context of US-Vietnamese relations. More specifically, we must examine if these issues demonstrated that a major constraining factor for the United States government, such as the public demand for the fullest possible accounting of its missing, actually was manipulated as a diplomatic tool which facilitated opening up relations between the SRV and the United States.

From this analysis, one can conclude that the POW/MIA accounting efforts provided four benefits for the diplomatic effort directed towards bettering bilateral relations between the United States and the SRV:

1. MIA accounting efforts provided a means of communication between the US and SRV governments in a time of heightened tensions, and in a unique manner that allowed measured progress in an environment acceptable to both parties.

2. MIA accounting efforts not only demonstrated Vietnam's readiness for closer bilateral ties with the United States, but also readied the US populace for the normalization of relations with a former enemy, which was then widely viewed as a dysfunctional pariah state.

3. Relatively small local expenditures by the United States in MIA search and recovery efforts in Vietnam had disproportional effects on our bilateral relations and may have encouraged broader cooperation.

4. The MIA issue provided a barometer of the level of interest that the government of the SRV had in normalizing relations on a fair, equal, and humane basis while also providing a small window into the machinations and organization of a closed communist regime

If these four conclusions are correct, then the answer to the primary question must be yes, that the POW/MIA accounting effort play a significant role in opening up relations between the United States of America and the SRV. Nevertheless, one must be careful not to categorize it as the primary reason or even as the primary vehicle for the normalization of relations. While it played a very important role in a multitude of ways and continues to be an important diplomatic tool, it was by far not the single motive force. In the four ways mentioned, it was used as an enabler. Its economic influence was derived from the critical Vietnamese strategic objective which was to better their economy. This manifested itself at the macro level in that the Vietnamese used the issue as a way of keeping the United States engaged. They used it in the short-term to leverage aid and grant monies and at the microlevel to improve local economies. But these smaller benefits which were directly the result of the accounting effort were only peripheral

interim measures to improve their economic situation. Thus, the direct effects of the POW/MIA accounting effort again had a supporting--not primary--role in the long-term. On the US side, the issue was rather successfully used as a tool to ready public opinion for greater ties to Vietnam because it provided concrete proof that the former enemy was now serious about addressing the concerns of the United States. While successful in this manner, the fact that so many uninformed US citizens still do not understand the great change in our relationship with Vietnam, it cannot be said to have been 100 percent successful in this regard. Additionally, it is very clear that the POW/MIA issue was not purposefully used in this manner, but that the readying of public opinion was but a bonus effect. As for providing a better understanding of the SRV government and its concerns, the accounting effort helped quite a bit in making the course of normalization easier for both governments. However, there is no evidence that the normalization process would not had occurred without the POW/MIA accounting effort, it just may have taken longer and resulted in a less cordial relationship than what exists now due to a lack of understanding between the two parties. This brings us to the fourth point which is the most important way that these actions facilitated the normalization of relations, and that was that they provided a unique forum for communication throughout a time period when other means were not acceptable.

Now that we have determined that the POW/MIA accounting effort did facilitate the opening up of relations, what insights can we gain from this? To say that we can now use this same method to open up relations with other pariah traits such as Myanmar or North Korea would be foolish because the motivations and methods of each of those countries is so significantly different and their wars so much longer ago. That is not to

say that the POW/MIA effort in those countries will not bear fruit in the form of better communications, it is to say that the effects will not be so dynamic as those from Vietnam. This is also because of the US public's interest and deep involvement in the POW/MIA accounting effort in Vietnam from the very beginning. The lesson that can be taken away by our government policy makers is much broader and overarching than that. It is that a constraining factor put in place by the concerns of the public of a democratic nation are not inherent weaknesses when wisely used.

Some may argue that the deep desire to account for the missing was and continues to be a weakness of US foreign policy with regard to Vietnam. Indeed, it continues to be a major constraint on US policy makers and diplomats. However, the accounting efforts of the United States in Vietnam in the end were not, and are not, detrimental to the diplomatic and economic initiatives of the United States in Southeast Asia. They have proved to be one of the primary factors in facilitating the normalization of relations with Vietnam. Upon first glance, one may come to the conclusion that this was very simple, that the US interest in accounting of its missing was used by diplomats to open up discussions which eventually lead to deeper cooperation. However, it is much more complicated than such a simple explanation. The efforts and activities to achieve the fullest possible accounting ultimately served several other purposes. This paper has demonstrated the benefits that were derived from these efforts. It shows how the sacrifices that were made by so many service members so long ago, and the efforts of their families to remember them, and the military to find them, proved to be not a weakness, but both a diplomatic and an informational instrument of strategic power for the United States. This is an excellent example of the fact that a "constraint" is not

necessarily a weakness, when dealt with appropriately. Future generations may not be able to use specific lessons from this experience in other examples of renormalizing relations, such as with North Korea, because the particulars of each case are so different. However, the example of how a seeming weakness can be used to ultimate advantage is timeless.

Much more research needs to be conducted on this subject before more definitive conclusions are made. More interviews with key players at JPAC need to be conducted. A larger number of interpreters who were involved in the negotiations need to be located. Interviews must be conducted by those on the Vietnamese side, especially key negotiators and decision makers like Nguyen Co Thach. When USPACOM, DoD, and the Department of State records are declassified, these must be reviewed. Finally, the financial records pertaining to the POW/MIA accounting effort and the negotiations with Vietnam must be reviewed in much greater detail.

Tracing the local expenditures of JCRC and JTF-FA may produce important findings on how lower-level expenditures by US government operations overseas can percolate up to affect events on a strategic level. This avenue appears to be the most promising for further research because the concept of how local expenditures, such as those used for hiring local manpower in recovery operations affected the bureaucratic decision-making process of the SRV government. This paper is only but a very basic and limited first look at a very complex subject on which much more research needs to be conducted.

APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGY OF IMPORTANT EVENTS

5 August 1964	Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Everett Alvarez becomes the first known POW/MIA during the Vietnam War.
January 1969	Nixon Administration assumes office. Plenary peace talks are underway in Paris, but they have made little headway. These and related peace talks continue until 27 January 1973. ¹
August 1969	Separate, secret peace talks begin between Dr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in Paris ²
May 1970	National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia is formed. ³
January 1972	Secret peace talks made public in response to US antiwar protests ⁴
30 March 1972	Communists launch the “Easter Offensive” disrupting the progress of the talks
July 1972	Paris talks resume.
23 January 1973	Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) established in Saigon to oversee accounting efforts in Indochina
27 January 1973	“The Agreement Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam” signed by the United States, the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Vietnam (the PRG, known in the United States as the Viet Cong)
28 January 1973	Four-Party Joint Military Commission (FPJMC) established and will exist for 60 days to implement the ceasefire. ⁵ Fighting never fully ceases.
1 February 1973	President Nixon sends a letter to Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong promising over \$3 billion for reconstruction, which is never forthcoming. ⁶
29 March 1973	US military withdrawal from Vietnam. US POWs held by the DRV are released. The Four-Party Joint Military Team (FPJMT) is established to address residual issues remaining after the dissolution of the FPJMC. The US delegation to this team conducts

regular technical talks until it is dissolved. These talks focus only on the specific accounting efforts of the team, such as safe passage of aircraft, etc. Despite efforts to resolve issues through the FPJMT, JCRC continues to be hampered in its efforts throughout its existence because of the ongoing fighting. There are some notable successes, but these are few and far between due to communist suspicions that the team is actually being used to collect intelligence and Vietnamese health concerns about handling some remains.⁷

- 9 August 1974 Nixon resigns, Gerald Ford becomes President.

- 21 April 1975 Last JCRC members evacuated and relocated to Thailand. Despite the pressures of the deteriorating situation, special consideration is taken to assure that personnel are not used for any mission not directly related to the humanitarian accounting effort.⁸

- 30 April 1975 The government of the Republic of Vietnam falls. As Saigon is falling, representatives of the DRV “asked quite emphatically” that the US delegation to the FPJMT stay in Vietnam to continue discussions on the POW/MIA issue as well as to maintain diplomatic contact with the United States.

- August 1975 The US Secretaries of State and Defense agree that JCRC will not only continue accounting efforts, but will “assume the negotiation responsibilities” formerly held by the US delegation to the FPJMT.

- 9-11 August 1975 On 9 August DRV states that it will release the remains of three missing pilots. On 11 August the US vetoes UN membership for the DRV. The DRV immediately retracts offer to release remains.⁹

- September 1975 Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Le Duan, visits Beijing. China expresses concern over closeness of Soviet-Vietnamese relations. PRC refuses to give additional monetary aid. Le Duan then visits Moscow, where he receives promises of over \$3 billion in aid.¹⁰

- 11 September 1975 Congressional Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia formed.

- December 1975 Congressman Montgomery and other members of the select committee visit Hanoi. The committee focuses on reestablishing relations, not specific POW/MIA issues. Vietnamese place emphasis on monies promised in Nixon’s letter of 1 February 1973. During the meeting Prime Minister Pham Van Dong states

	that no more US POWs are held, but fails to mention Arlo Gay a civilian and PFC Robert Garwood. ¹¹
20 January 1977	Jimmy Carter assumes office as President.
May 1976	JCRC moves from Thailand to Hawaii. ¹²
September 1976	Mr. Gay is released. This greatly fuels suspicions that the SRV is holding more prisoners.
25 February 1977	Presidential Commission established. Leonard Woodcock, President of the United Auto Workers is selected as Chairman by President Carter.
16-19 March 1977	Woodcock Commission visits Hanoi. Remains of 12 more missing servicemen turned over by the Vietnamese. Vietnamese emphasis is on monetary issues and normalization.
3-4 May 1977	Normalization talks between the United States and the SRV in Paris. Vietnamese emphasis is on monetary issues.
2 June 1977	Round Two of US-SRV normalization talks in Paris ¹³
10 September 1977	Ten sets of US remains returned by Vietnam. ¹⁴
20 September 1977	SRV admitted into the UN
19 December 1977	Round Three of US-SRV normalization talks in Paris.
February 1978	UN Ambassador for the SRV is expelled from the United States for involvement in spying. Round Four of the normalization talks is cancelled.
March 1978	SRV imposes sanctions on ethnic Chinese residing in Vietnam. Numbers of refugees increase. ¹⁵
June 1978	SRV joins Soviet-dominated Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) ¹⁶
July 1978	SRV team visits JCRC and CIL in Hawaii. 11 sets of remains are returned.
22 September 1978	US State Department negotiator Richard Holbrook and SRV Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach meet to discuss normalization. Thach drops demands for monetary reparations.

October 1978	Carter administration decides to delay normalization with Vietnam due to concerns about the pending normalization of relations with the PRC. ¹⁷
2 November 1978	Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed.
15 December 1978	Announcement of the normalization of Sino-US relations. This officially comes into effect on 1 January 1979. ¹⁸
25 December 1978	Vietnam invades Kampuchea (Cambodia). ¹⁹ This was probably in reaction to Khmer Rouge incited border attacks which had occurred in the months prior.
7 January 1979	Phnom Penh falls to invading SRV troops.
17 February 1979	PRC invades the SRV. ²⁰
March 1979	PFC Garwood, who had collaborated with the communists after his capture, is returned to the United States by his own request. This further fuels US suspicions that other US POWs are still held by the SRV. ²¹
5 March 1979	PRC announces the withdrawal of its forces from the SRV. ²²
November 1979	Executive Director of the National League of Families is given access to classified information by DIA. ²³
January 1980	<p>Congressional Delegation headed by Congressman Lester Wolff visits Hanoi. They confront SRV representatives about the possible stockpiling of remains. The Congressman later questions Vietnamese witnesses in public hearings about this matter in July 1980. Limited JCRC-SRV Technical Talks occur sporadically with no progress.²⁴</p> <p>Also during January, the Inter-agency Group (IAG) is established. It includes representatives from the League of Families, the Departments of State and Defense, and Congress.²⁵</p>
October 1980	First technical meeting held in Hanoi. JCRC represents the United States. SRV is represented by members of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, National Defense, and the Interior. Little progress is made on the POW/MIA as the Vietnamese use the meeting to convey their positions on many other subjects. ²⁶ This pattern of SRV representation continues until the present day. ²⁷

20 January 1981	Ronald Reagan assumes office as President.
May 1981	Second technical meeting held in Hanoi. Three sets of remains are returned.
February 1982	Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage visits Hanoi, but is met by a very low-level Vietnamese delegation. According to Childress and Solarz, the Vietnamese do not reply to request to increase pace of POW/MIA Technical Talks. ²⁸ According to Mather, regular technical discussions are established (four times per year). Technical talks and other meetings resume and are called off intermittently for the next five years.
August 1982	SRV delegation visits CIL and JCRC in Hawaii. ²⁹
September 1982	National League of Families delegation visits the SRV to deliver their position on the POW/MIA issue. ³⁰
October 1982	Four sets of remains returned by the SRV.
December 1982	Technical discussions between JCRC and SRV representatives occur.
28 June 1983	Secretary of State George Schultz makes critical comments about the SRV and technical talks are called off by the SRV. ³¹
February 1984	Assistance Secretary of Defense Armitage visits Hanoi a second time. Technical talks are restarted.
6-9 February 1985	SRV representatives bring up issue of normalization repeatedly during regularly scheduled technical talks. ³²
March 1985	Richard Childress of the National Security Council visits Hanoi. SRV agrees to increase number of technical meetings to six per year. ³³
Jan-Feb 1986	Third visit by Armitage to Hanoi, accompanied by Assistant Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz. ³⁴ Foreign Minister Thach recommends a US technical presence in Hanoi. A US Congressional Delegation also visits. Focus is on POW/MIA issues.
July 1986	Foreign Minister Thach recommends biannual policy-level meetings to NSC Staff Member Childress during talks in Hanoi. ³⁵

10 July 1986	Le Duan dies. He is replaced as Chairman by Truong Chinh.
January 1987	General (Ret.) Vessey appointed Special Emissary to Vietnam by President Reagan. ³⁶
April 1987	US official meet with SRV Ambassador to the UN to discuss the appointment of General (Ret.) Vessey. Related talks continue in Hanoi. ³⁷
May 1987	Advanced delegation from the National Security Council goes to Hanoi to lay groundwork for General Vessey's first visit. ³⁸
1 August 1987	General (Ret.) Vessey visits Hanoi with members of the IAG. Agreements reached in the areas of US assistance for Vietnamese veterans and POW/MIA accounting efforts.
25 August 1987	JCRC/CIL technical talks in Hanoi make significant progress. Aid operations for Vietnamese disabled begin. ³⁹ Significantly larger numbers of remains begin to be returned.
17 November 1989	Key points of President Bush's "roadmap" are put out at a Subcommittee on Asian/Pacific Affairs meeting. They link normalization directly with the POW/MIA issue and a settlement on Cambodia.
8 January 1988	General (Ret.) Vessey meets with Minister Thach in New York. Regular correspondence continues.
25 September 1988	First major JCRC/CIL search and recovery team arrives in Hanoi. ⁴⁰
20 January 1989	George Bush assumes office as President. He states in his inaugural address that progress on the POW/MIA issue would remove a major obstacle to US-SRV relations. ⁴¹
5 April 1989	SRV announces complete troop withdrawal from Cambodia. ⁴²
May 1989	Mikhail Gorbachev travels to Beijing to normalize Sino-Soviet relations.
June 1989	Tiananmen square massacre.
August 1989	Paris Conference on Cambodia. ⁴³
October 1989	Second visit by General (Ret.) Vessey to Hanoi.

9 November 1989	Berlin Walls falls.
18 July 1990	Secretary of State Baker announces withdrawal of US recognition for the Khmer Rouge Government in Kampuchea (Cambodia).
September 1990	Secret meetings are held between the SRV and the PRC beginning in Chengdu, PRC in order to resolve differences. No significant progress is made until after the resignation of Foreign Minister Thach in 1991. ⁴⁴
29 September 1990	Secretary Baker and Minister Thach meet in New York according to Mather. ⁴⁵ Solomon states that the key meeting occurred on 29 September. ⁴⁶ Talks include all aspects of the normalization of relations.
April 1991	General (Ret.) Vessey makes third trip to Hanoi. Agreement reached on US search and recovery office in Hanoi.
9 April 1991	US and SRV normalization talks begin using President Bush's "roadmap." ⁴⁷
June 1991	Foreign Minister Thach retires after losing his Politburo seat during the 7th Party Congress. He is replaced by Nguyen Manh Cam. Cooperation on POW/MIA issues temporarily slows. PRC-SRV relations are soon normalized. ⁴⁸
2 August 1991	Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs established under the leadership of Senator John F. Kerry. ⁴⁹
19 August 1991	Collapse of the USSR (putsch and overthrow of Gorbachev).
23 January 1992	Joint Task Force-FULL ACCOUNTING (JTF-FA) established. ⁵⁰
22 March 1993	Secretary of State Warren Christopher announces that the SRV has met the first requirement for normalization, that of cooperation on the Cambodia issue, but has not fully completed the POW/MIA requirement. ⁵¹
3 February 1993	President Clinton announces that the embargo against the SRV will be lifted.
May 1993	Cambodia elections.
2 July 1993	International Monetary Fund refinances SRV debt.

3 February 1994	Trade embargo lifted.
11 July 1995	US-SRV diplomatic relations established. ⁵²
August 1995	Secretary of State Christopher visits Hanoi and opens embassy. Desaix Anderson appointed <i>Charge d’Affaires</i> and US Mission established in Hanoi. ⁵³
July 1996	National Security Advisor Anthony Lake visits Hanoi.
October 1996	Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Campbell leads delegation consisting of Defense, State, National Security Council, and USPACOM to visit the SRV. Discussions included POW/MIA matters, warship visits, a visit by the Commander of USPACOM, and many more significant engagement activities.
February 1997	Group of SRV Colonels visit Washington to discuss future engagement and port-calls by US warships.
March 1997	Commander of USPACOM, Admiral Joseph Prueher visits Hanoi to discuss POW/MIA issues and other engagement activities.
May 1997	United States and the SRV exchange ambassadors, Le Van Bang and Douglas Peterson.
June 1997	Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visits Vietnam
October 1998	General Tran Hahn, Minister of National Defense, meets with Secretary of Defense William Cohan in Washington, D.C.. Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Cam also visits.
December 1998	Admiral Prueher makes second visit to the SRV.
March 2000	Secretary of Defense Cohen visits Hanoi.
13 July 2000	Major bilateral trade agreement signed.
September 2000	Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien visits Washington DC.
January 2002	Admiral Dennis Blair, Commander USPACOM, visits Hanoi.
November 2003	Minister of National Defense General Pham Van Tra visits Washington to meet with Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice

1 October 2004 Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command was formed by combining
JTF-FA and CIL under one headquarters

¹Paul Mather, *M.I.A. Accounting for the Missing in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1994), 1.

²James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 119.

³Mather, 95.

⁴Willbanks, 121.

⁵Mather, 4-5.

⁶United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, "Senate Select POW-MIA Affairs Report," reprinted in *Essential Documents of American History Essential Documents 1492-Present*, eds. Norman P. Desmarais and James H. McGovern of Providence College (New York: Great Neck Publishing, 2002), 53 of 614.

⁷Mather, 9.

⁸*Ibid.*, 28.

⁹*Ibid.*, 36-44.

¹⁰Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989* (London: Routledge, 2001), 286.

¹¹Mather, 40-42.

¹²*Ibid.*, 49.

¹³*Ibid.*, 51-61.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁸Elleman, 284.

¹⁹Richard H. Solomon, *Exiting Indochina, US Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement and Normalization with Vietnam* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000), 80.

²⁰Elleman, 284.

²¹Mather, 43.

²²Elleman, 292.

²³Mather, 97.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 86.

²⁵United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, 190 of 614.

²⁶Mather, 124.

²⁷Colonel Thomas T. Smith former JTF-FA Detachment Commander in Hanoi, interview by the author, 18 November 2004.

²⁸Richard T. Childress and Stephen Solarz, "Vietnam: Detours on the Road to Normalization," in *Reversing Relations with Former Adversaries*, ed. C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1988), 95.

²⁹Mather, 128.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 97.

³¹*Ibid.*, 128.

³²*Ibid.*, 152.

³³*Ibid.*, 135.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 129.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 152-153.

³⁶United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, 109 of 614.

³⁷Mather, 156.

³⁸Childress and Solarz, 98.

³⁹Mather, 158.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 161-163.

⁴¹Solomon, 83.

⁴²Ibid., 16.

⁴³Ibid., 24.

⁴⁴Ibid., 74.

⁴⁵Mather, 172.

⁴⁶Solomon, 85.

⁴⁷Mather, 172.

⁴⁸Childress and Solarz, 100.

⁴⁹Mather, 185.

⁵⁰United States Senate, Select Committee for POW-MIA Affairs, 109 of 614.

⁵¹Childress and Solarz, 102.

⁵²Solomon, 6.

⁵³Carlyle A. Thayer, *Security Relations and Prospects for Strategic Dialogue Between the United States and Vietnam* (Canberra: University of New South Wales Defense Studies Forum at the Australian Defense Force Academy, January 2005).

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